

### Review: The real politics of the Horn of Africa: money, war and the business of power

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**Book Review:**

## **The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power**

Luca Puddu\*

*The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power* by Alex De Waal, 2015, Cambridge: Polity

For scholars concerned with the politics of conflict, the Horn of Africa is an interesting area of enquiry. There is no other region in sub-Saharan Africa where the *uti possidetis* principle embedded in the post-colonial order has been more challenged by grass-roots movements and ethnic insurgencies than the Horn, the breakaway Republic of Somaliland being only the last case of a quasi-state struggling for international recognition after the successful examples of South Sudan and Eritrea.

De Waal's *Real Politics of the Horn of Africa* is a well-done attempt to understand the roots of this web of conflict by a scholar who studied and carried out fieldwork in the area for more than thirty years. It is not a surprise, then, if this book contains an incredibly detailed description of the chain of events that shaped the political history of the region in the twenty-first century through a careful analysis of its most relevant turning points. De Waal draws on seven case studies from Darfur, Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somaliland and Somalia to unpack the complex mosaic of inter-state and intra-state relations in the area; however, in spite of the adoption of a narrative line that places internationally recognised sovereign states at the centre of the analysis, his book is, nonetheless, more concerned with the individuals who manage formal state structures. According to the author, in fact, the politics of boundaries and institutions “functions only within the gravitational field of informal bargaining over power”(p. 35).

Chapter 2 delineates the key concept of the book: regional politics functions according to the rules of the market, with a continuous bargain of material rewards in return for loyalty and service. This political marketplace is “a contemporary system of governance in which politics is conducted as the exchange of political services”, and the Horn of Africa is “an advanced and militarized political marketplace, characterized by pervasive rent-seeking and monetized patronage, with violence routinely used as a tool for extracting rent “(p. 16). From Darfur to Eritrea and Somalia, the African elite of the new millennium is not interested in state building, but manipulates the facade of formal institutions to obtain access to external rents and secure economic resources that, in turn, might be distributed among a dispersed intermediary elite that controls the means of violence.

Chapter 3 analyses the historical trajectory of regional politics in the Horn of Africa. The author proposes a representation of the region as “a woodland landscape seen from above” (p. 35), where each formal political centre is a tree that spreads its branches across the region in an endless competition for sunlight. This image is a reminder that “political geography is like a living entity, growing and competing (p. 36), but also a metaphor for a fractal patrimonial hierarchy “in which each patron has multiple clients, each of which is in turn a patron of others”(p. 37). In this perspective, transnational conflicts in the Horn of Africa are interpreted as the outcome of the endless competition between ambitious national rulers, who try to build transnational patronage networks with the provincial elite within their own territory and in neighbouring countries, with the ultimate purpose of scaling up their position within the regional hierarchy (p. 50).

Chapter 4 is focused on the development of the political marketplace in the Sudanese eastern periphery of Darfur. A brief historical background on the multiple dimensions of geopolitical competition along the Sudanese-Chadian frontier drives the reader through an in-depth analysis

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of the commodification of politics and counter-insurgency in Darfur after 2002. The argument is that war in Darfur has become the norm, a legitimate tool to bargain the price of temporary peace according to the oscillation of the market. Since the price of loyalty has been inflated by the intervention of multiple state and non-state actors, De Waal suggests that the best situation to be hoped for in the immediate future of Darfur is that of an “interwar”, where the conditions of the political marketplace “make a low level [of] violence optimal” (p. 67), rather than a permanent peace between all stakeholders.

Chapter 5 provides a fiscal sociology of the transnational Islamist project in Sudan after the 1989 takeover by Al Bashir and an interpretation of the political economy of the Sudanese state towards its peripheries, notably South Sudan and the Nuba mountains. The persistent instability that has affected the hinterlands of the Sudanese state beyond its miniature core in the Hamdi Triangle and Port Sudan is framed as a consequence of the militarised patronage system established by national rulers to contain security threats and extract trading profits or control natural resources, which has turned into a violent political marketplace.

Chapter 6 is focused on South Sudan. In describing the various ups and down of peace negotiation and a periodical return to war in the most recent African state, the author contests the mainstream narrative of an inter-ethnic conflict between the Nuer, the Dinka and other ethnic groups, but argues that conflict is driven by the ambition of political entrepreneurs, each of whom “dissatisfied with the resources allocated to him, seeks a better deal (...) organizes a mutiny and mounts an armed attack to advertise his claim” (p. 98).

Chapter 7 deals with the civil war in southern and central Somalia. De Waal underlines how, in his opinion, the main driver of conflict in the last 25 years has been the external intervention of foreign powers and their quest to re-establish a functioning central government based on external rent (p. 110).

Chapter 8 analyses the trajectory of Somaliland, the *de facto* separatist republic in the northwestern part of the former Somali territory. Somaliland is taken as an example of political authority that, acting in collaboration with the local business community, has successfully regulated violence.

Chapter 9 is dedicated to Eritrea, defined by the author as a “museum of modernism”. The chapter describes the background to the 1998-2000 border war and the economic factors that underpinned the deterioration of the bilateral relationship between the two liberation-movements-turned-governments of Eritrea and Ethiopia, then explores the changing political economy of Eritrea and its ruler’s ability to extract assistance from regional and international powers in return for the threat of promoting instability in neighbouring countries.

Chapter 10 is focused on Ethiopia and its late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. This chapter is, to a large extent, a description of the political and economic project envisaged by Meles and the inner circle within the Ethiopian People’s Republic Democratic Front.

Chapters 11 and 12 are an attempt to delineate a theoretical framework for the political marketplace in the Horn of Africa. The author returns to the realist argument advanced at the beginning of the book, arguing that “political entrepreneurs may have ideals and try to pursue a political agenda (...) but the demands of operating in a marketplace in which power is continually transacted for material reward mean that the determinant of success become political business capabilities, nothing else”. Accordingly, “the logic of political market reduces people to commodities and interpersonal relations to bargaining over material reward” (p. 196).

*The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa* provides a powerful account of how the incorporation of the Horn of Africa within the mercantile logics of global capitalism has produced a new variant of neo-patrimonialism: the rentier system. The regional scene is not dominated anymore by a few gatekeeper states, but by a multiplicity of national and sub-national actors that have quasi-independent access to previously unavailable streams of revenue from international actors or organisations and pursue their own personal interest after a careful balancing of incentives and constraints. The driver of conflict is profit, which might be an end in itself or an instrument to enrol new clients at the expense of neighbours. There is no space for ideology, ethnicity or historical memory: according to the author, identity politics is just an opportunistic strategy to minimise the risk of mutiny and mobilise military manpower at a lower cost.

One of the most interesting features of this book is the attempt to put the greater Horn of Africa region, including South Sudan and the eastern Sudanese frontier, under a single frame of enquiry, thereby challenging existing disciplinary boundaries along national and sub-national lines. The author defies, for instance, the very idea of Ethiopian studies as a field of analysis separated from the broader theme of African studies, arguing that Bayart's politics of the belly (Bayart, 1993) worked in Ethiopia as much as elsewhere. The chapter on Ethiopia, with its focus on the figure of the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and his attempt to prevent rent seeking through the creation of a developmental state is, nonetheless, revealing of a certain continuity with "earlier generations of scholars (...) writing from more of an Orientalist than an African tradition" (156). The book's thesis that Ethiopia's state building trajectory is the only challenge to the logics of the political marketplace seems to be a refashioned proposition of the Great Tradition theory (Clapham, 2002), since both rely exclusively on the perspective of the centre to build the thesis of the strong, unitary state that incorporates and civilises the unruly periphery. It would have been interesting to have an account of what kind of political marketplace, if any, is developing in those pastoral frontiers, where "there is no EPRDF presence and no basis for a democratic developmental state" (p. 169).

It is the opinion of the reviewer that the notion of political marketplace developed by De Waal might become a powerful theoretical framework for future social scientists concerned with the analysis of regional and international politics in the Horn of Africa region. Nevertheless, this book should be considered more as a starting point for future research on specific case studies than as an exhaustive interpretative tool by itself. As it stands, the political marketplace described by *Real Politics* appears as a self-fulfilling prophecy that applies to very different situations, with the result that at times the author struggles to adapt empirical facts to the theoretical model he has chosen, not the contrary. A last point should be made in relation to the realistic perspective that pervades the whole book. De Walle cites Polanyi (Polanyi, 1944) to explain the triumph of the mercantile logic of the political marketplace "over other ways of organizing social and political life" (p. 216): moral economists, however, might argue that organised violence during the transition from pre-market towards fully capitalist societies was not always the outcome of a calculated search for material reward (Thompson, 1971), but a response to the new economic order's inability to meet those moral values that distinguished what was just and what was not.

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